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NEWSWEEK
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Blue-Chip Defector

A KGB 'biggie' bolts to the CIA.

From the arrest of former Navy submariner John Walker to the defection of West German counterintelligence official Hans Joachim Tiedge, the summer of 1985 has been rife with startling disclosures from the murky underworld of espionage—a spate of news that made Soviet penetration of Western defense organizations seem widespread, effortless and dismally routine. But last week Washington was buzzing about a spy story with a difference: the defection of a top-ranking Soviet spymaster named Vitaly Yurchenko, 50, to the West. Yurchenko, U.S. intelligence sources said, was nothing less than a deputy chairman of the KGB and chief of the Soviet spy agency's operations directorate —perhaps the most useful Soviet defector in 50 years. "He was extremely valuable. It was a hell of a blow to them," said Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "This guy was a big, big biggie—and he's left the KGB all f---ed up," said a U.S. intelligence expert.

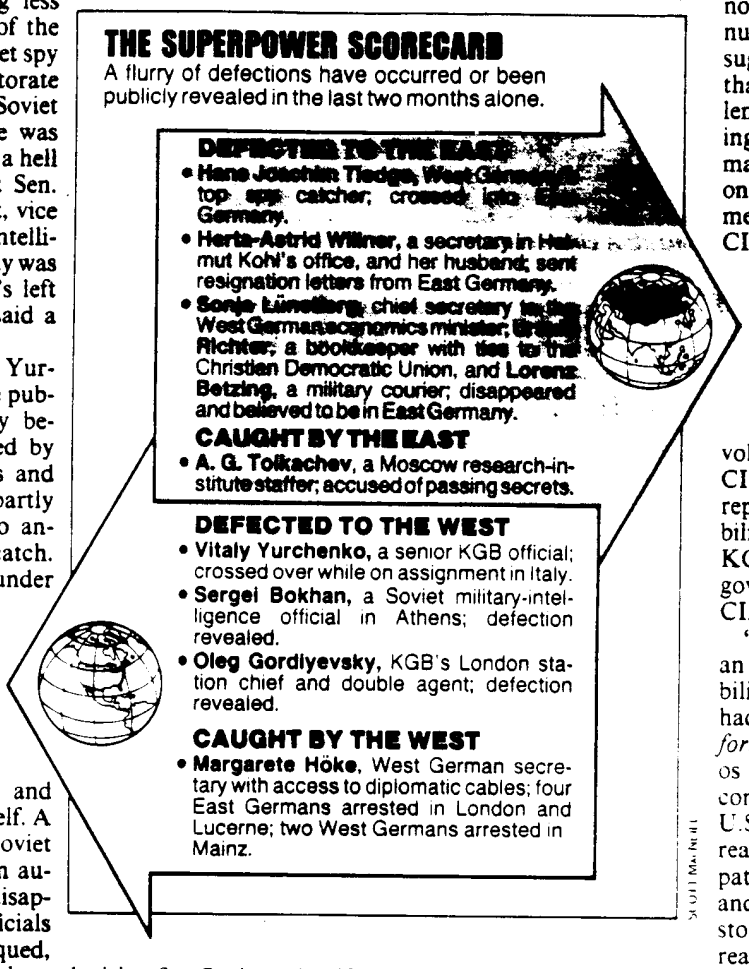
Prize Catch: At first, the Yurchenko case attracted little publicity in the West—partly because it was overshadowed by the flurry of spy scandals and defections elsewhere and partly because the CIA made no announcement of its prize catch. Yurchenko, traveling under diplomatic cover, simply dropped from sight on Aug. 1 in Rome: according to U.S. sources, he had been assigned to trace another Soviet defector, possibly a physicist named Vladimir Aleksandrov,* and chose to change sides himself. A brief flap ensued. The Soviet government notified Italian authorities of Yurchenko's disappearance, but Italian officials found no trace of him. Piqued, the Soviets canceled the planned visit of a Soviet scientific delegation to a disarmament conference in Sicily. The controversy echoed in the Italian press for a time, and then there was silence—until last week, when columnist Ralph de Toledano trumpeted Yurchenko's defection in a lengthy article in The Washington Times. Yurchenko, de Toledano said, was in American hands and was telling U.S. intelligence officials everything he knew—which was plenty. U.S. officials confirmed Yurchenko was in the United States—and sources hinted he indeed had much to say.

Topic A, according to a variety of leaks from American sources, was KGB penetration of the U.S. intelligence community itself—the ultimate question for a spy. Yurchenko had been first secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Washington from 1975 to 1979, a post that was a cover for his real job in the KGB, perhaps as the agency's station chief in the United States. On returning to Moscow, moreover, he had moved to the very apex of the vast Soviet espionage apparatus deployed against the West. Now, knowledgeable sources said, he was warning the United States that the CIA had potentially serious security problems of its own. News stories last week speculated that Yurchenko had "fingered" Soviet "moles" in the CIA. The CIA officially denied that—but the denial was carefully hedged. "He did not identify any moles in the CIA, past or present," one CIA official said. However, intelligence sources pointed out that the denial did not exclude the possibility of "security problems" at the agency.

The semantic distinction could be meaningless: a "security problem" can do enormous damage, even if the CIA employee is not a career Soviet agent. And numerous news leaks last week suggested that the CIA had more than one such "security problem," with some sources indicating that at least one rotten apple may have been relatively high up on the CIA tree. One government source said a well-placed CIA staffer had recently left the country, presumably for Mexico; another source told The Associated Press that Yurchenko had identified "more than one and less than six" CIA employees who had been involved with the KGB. Again, CIA sources flatly denied the reports. There was also the possibility that Yurchenko revealed KGB penetration elsewhere in government. "No comment," a CIA official said.

'Panic' in the KGB: There was an even more disturbing possibility as well—that Yurchenko had come West to spread *disinformation*, thereby creating chaos within the U.S. intelligence community. That possibility, U.S. experts acknowledged, was real, and it will take months of patient interrogation to check and double-check Yurchenko's story. "You've got to ask, 'Is he real? Or is he bait on which to bite—and if so, what's the hook?' " said former CIA hand George Carver. Meanwhile, most knowledgeable officials seemed convinced that his arrival was an intelligence coup of enormous value to the West. Coupled with the defections of two other prominent Soviet spies—Oleg Gordiyevsky, the KGB station chief in London, and Sergei Bokhan, a Soviet military-intelligence agent in Greece—the Yurchenko case may have put the West ahead in the great spy game, they said; surely it disrupted Soviet espionage. "The fact that so many people of similar background have defected is causing unbelievable panic and consternation in the KGB," said Leahy. "Every analysis we have is that it will cause them problems for years to come."

TOM MORGANTHAU with KIM WILLENSON in Washington and RICHARD SANDZA in San Francisco



*Aleksandrov, an expert in computer modeling of nuclear-war scenarios, disappeared in Madrid last spring.

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